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ABSTRACT

Six specific second language learning theories are presented and for each, an example of a practical, classroom application is provided. The theories include the following: (1) it is important to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom because cognitive learning increases when self-concept improves; (2) activities that employ multiple senses facilitate memory; (3) language learning is accelerated when the content is interesting and useful; (4) the major path to language competence is indirect, implicit, subconscious acquisition via comprehensible input, rather than direct and conscious learning through formal instruction; (5) comprehension is the first step in language acquisition; and (6) movement increases interest, focus, and motivation. A game incorporating several of these theories, and including specific classroom procedures, is also provided. The game is designed to review or introduce nouns, phrases, or other structures and to reinforce comprehension or speaking skills. A brief annotated bibliography is appended. (MSE)

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From Research to Reality: Activities and Strategies That Work

by Jo Ann Olliphant

Most of the current second language and learning research is in agreement that an optimum learning environment includes several basic elements. Understanding the theory behind these components is important and there is an abundance of professional literature available for those who wish to investigate specific theories in depth. Theoretical understanding remains without impact, however, unless it can be translated to practical application in the classroom. The development from theory into specific classroom activities in teacher resources and curriculum guides is clearly essential.

My purpose is to give the reader both theory and examples of practical application. The last part of the article, a game from *Total Physical Fun*, incorporates several of the theories discussed and includes specific *how to* details for classroom use.

Theory: It is important to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom because cognitive learning increases when self-concept improves.

A widespread impediment to foreign language learning is the learner's fear of making errors and appearing foolish. Learners quickly become inhibited in a negative or stressful environment. Language and ego are inseparable, and many students live in constant fear of ridicule by their peers and teachers.

Application: Willing risk-takers make good language learners. It's important to structure time for students to get to know their classmates in order to build the trust necessary to enable risk-taking. Beginning foreign language learners cannot yet converse in the target language, so ice-breaking and trust-building activities must be done in English.

During instruction in the target language, put students at ease by asking for whole or small group, rather than individual responses. Design or utilize activities which allow students to work in pairs or teams. Encourage students to be supportive and help their neighbors or group members. With the

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support of partners or teammates, stress is reduced because the risk of error is shared. In games or activities requiring a single response, allow a group effort in the formulation of the answer, but rotate the responsibility of the student who gives the official response.

Direct criticism puts the learner on the defensive, so avoid negative vocabulary and use indirect correction. For example, when TPR or a command strategy is being used and a student does an action in a manner other than as directed, either describe what the student did without saying, *No*, or repeat the command using intonation which communicates that you didn't receive a correct response. In question/answer practices, when a student gives an incorrect answer, avoid the word *No*. Just give a regretful look and ask again, directing the question to another student if you see that the first student doesn't wish to offer another response. Another positive alternative is to change the question, so that the student's answer is correct.

When students differ in responses, praise those who do it correctly, without reprimanding or pointing out those who do it incorrectly. In addition, do not allow students, either through words or through actions, to put down others' efforts.

For more information and suggested activities on cooperative learning and self-esteem, see Canfield, and also Johnson and Johnson in the bibliography.

Theory: Activities which employ multiple senses facilitate memory.

The brain records information in different locations according to the sense through which it is received. When the information is stored, new neural connections are created in the brain. Retrieving or remembering becomes easier the more places the information is stored.

Application: The most frequently exercised sense in the classroom is hearing. Students are required to listen, listen, listen and are frequently criticized by teachers for not listening. Observation of teachers in a meeting or presentation will tell you that we are asking for something that we as a group have not mastered. Listening is important, but we all soon tune out if other senses are not stimulated.

The second most frequently used sense is sight. Early grade teachers take the prize for visually stimulating environments in education land. In high school, second language teachers are usually among those few teachers who provide a visually motivating classroom. Time spent in creating

pleasing and inspirational surroundings should have far greater priority than many of the other tasks that teachers are required to do. Remember that having the time and skills of an interior decorator is not necessary. Include ways for the students' products to adorn the walls and make sure it's clearly related to the learning goals. Keep in mind that color is an excellent aid to memory in your visuals, from visually electric flashcards to use of colored chalk at the board.

The sense of touch is third in frequency, but not in importance. Tactile encounters are especially important in beginning stages of language learning and relatively easy to do in the classroom. Interacting with props and objects conveys reality, convincing the brain that the information is real and should be stored. Foreign language conference exhibitors have rapidly become aware of the need and demand for realia. But don't wait for the next conference--your home and local thrift stores are bulging with words you want to teach.

Smell and taste are probably tied for last place since few of us have easy access to cooking facilities. Do not, however, let this keep you from an occasional smelling or tasting event. Non-cooking activities which employ smell include identifying odors of cooking extracts, spices, fruit juices or scented felt pens, or anything you wish to teach which has an odor. Blind taste tastes are also fun and interesting. Use different types of breads, beans, waters, cheeses or other foods.

For specific activities on smell, taste and the other senses, as well as how to set them up in the classroom, see *Total Physical Fun* in the bibliography.

Theory: Language learning is accelerated when the content is interesting and useful. For most students, information (especially in a textbook) is not real until it is converted into meaningful activity. If language is to be internalized, that knowledge must be used to transmit real messages, not artificial exchanges contrived for the sole purpose of practicing structure.

Application: The goal of covering the text is often given too high a priority. From the standpoint of content, a text is as effective as the number of ways the information therein is related to the students' goals and interests.

Research tells us that the the brain seldom considers information important enough to store until that same information is encountered many times. Yet, practice or review in the same ways invites boredom and often rejection of the content. Repetition must therefore be through different activities and contexts.

When learning a song, for example, if you detect looks of *Oh no, not again*, do the repetitions with varied pitch, rhythm, or volume. You can tap out accompaniment on different parts of the body or furniture and with different instruments (hand, pencil, book, pen, ruler). You might assign a division of labor that calls for some lines to be sung by those who are wearing socks, and other verses sung by those without socks or by students with jewelry and without jewelry. Students could create actions to accompany the meaning and perform them in small groups while the others sing the lines.

Research also shows us that learning takes place best in 20 minute segments. Activities with a great deal of variety can sustain longer periods; those with little variety should be shorter.

Theory: The major path to language competence is indirect, implicit, subconscious acquisition via comprehensible input, rather than direct and conscious learning through formal instruction.

Second language can be most efficiently acquired when used as a tool in other endeavors rather than an end in itself. This does not mean that we should abandon the examination of structure; however we must carefully consider our approach and timing in teaching it.

The teacher must communicate in ways which are clearly comprehensible to the learners and which clearly represent the intended meaning. Without comprehensible input from the teacher, the learner may misinterpret or become confused. The result is frustration and boredom which impede learning and even prevent it.

Application: Language can be used as a tool, for example, to cook, draw, dance, sing, experiment, seek information or play. These hands-on activities facilitate the teacher's task of giving comprehensible input because they can be taught through demonstration and participation rather than lecture.

The most common method of transmitting meaning in foreign language classrooms is through translation. Meaning is better transmitted through actions because most learners remember what they

see better than what they hear. For example, in my first year in a new school, I discovered that the French students who had learned the song *Alovette* thought it was a song about touching different parts of the body. This was a natural assumption because that was what was done by the previous teacher and the students when singing *Alovette*.

The teacher no doubt had introduced the song with an explanation of the meaning. The explanation was soon forgotten, but the actions lived on in the students' memories. To correct the misinterpretation in meaning, I drew a bird on a piece of cardboard, punched holes in the appropriate places and inserted a feather into each hole. Now as the students sing and pluck, they are correctly understanding and easily remembering the meaning of the song.

Fortunately, most teachers, whether they realize it or not, have acting skills. The more you develop that ability, the easier it is to deliver comprehensible input. If this intimidates you, remember that all people who have been caretakers of infants or young children have exercised their abilities in giving comprehensible input, and are therefore probably much more accomplished than they realize.

For more information on L₂ acquisition and comprehensible input see Krashen and Terrell in the bibliography.

Theory: Comprehension is the first step in language acquisition. The classroom is perhaps the only place in society where we are asked to immediately produce what we hear. In the natural patterns of first language development, many opportunities of hearing the words are provided before the learners are expected to speak. Even as adults, we hear new words several times and in several situations before incorporating them into our spoken language (if ever). Since we cannot say words that have not yet clearly registered on our ears, being asked to speak immediately is extremely stressful. Forcing early production sets students up for failure. Is it reasonable to expect them to say words they cannot yet hear?

Delayed oral response allows for more native-like pronunciation to develop. Poor pronunciation often means students did not receive sufficient input before they were asked to produce. Some learners are ready to speak after about ten hours of instruction; others, especially children, require more time.

Application: As in first language development, students should not be required to passively listen, but rather to interact with the environment and respond physically to the teacher and each other. Speech comes more easily and naturally when students have spent sufficient time listening and responding physically. Classroom activities which use delayed oral responses strategies have received much attention in the past decade. For teaching ideas and further explanation of the comprehension or delayed oral response theory, see Asher, Krashen and Terrell; Moore, and Winitz in the bibliography.

Theory: Movement increases interest, focus and motivation.

Kinesthetic or muscle-learning increases the supply of oxygen to the brain to maintain alertness and encourages long-term memory. In most kindergartens, there is a multitude of kinesthetic activities which excite young learners. As students grow older and learn to tolerate sitting still, movement is removed or greatly reduced in the classroom. It is no coincidence that there is a corresponding reduction in student interest and rate of learning. It is unfortunate that after kindergarten, kinesthetic teaching strategies take an increasingly less important role and are rapidly replaced by a preponderance of auditory activities.

Although there are other factors that lend to a decrease in the effectiveness of learning as we climb the educational ladder, lack of movement for the learners plays an important role. Teachers who realize that an effective instructor is active and moves about the classroom often miss the fact that in order to be effective learners, students have a corresponding need.

Application: The standard classroom could be said to be anti-learning in many ways, but the most obvious is that the physical arrangement does not allow for group movement. A classroom arranged to allow kinesthetic learning might consist of one space with chairs in a semicircle or U-shape for group activities with movement, and another area with tables or desks for writing and other table activities. Instead, the norm is 35 desks crammed one against another in a space rarely big enough to accommodate a storage cupboard.

A circle, for example, is an ideal formation for many interactive language activities. Even though it seems a hassle, space can usually be created by shoving or stacking furniture. Once students learn the rearranging procedure and get over the initial resistance to something new, the process will become painless and the benefits multiple.

The following game from *Total Physical Fun*, a book on learning language through cooperative play, is an example of an activity which maintains interest because of the movement. Acquisition of the language is indirect because students are using language as a tool and are focused on the process of the game. The use of props or pictures adds visual interest and helps create reality. It is a favorite of all age groups. *Total Physical Fun* is available by mail order from JoAnn Olliphant, 11004 111th St. S.W., Tacoma, WA 98498.

CHANGE PLACES

Purpose: Review or Introduction of Nouns, Phrases or Other Structures
(Comprehension or Speaking)

Materials: 4 to 6 large objects, flashcards or pictures

Procedure

Arrange students in a circle or semicircle. Chairs are best, but desks are manageable. Any empty chairs or desks are removed. The object of the game is to change chairs when your assigned name is called and never to be caught without a chair when the changing stops.

Place four to six objects about a foot apart in front of class (in the middle of the circle, on the chalkboard tray, or on a table in front of the class). Announce that each class member will be assigned an object and that it is important that all remember which object they are. If objects chosen are a shark, a cookie, a hat and a key, the first person (starting at one end of the semicircle or with anyone in the circle) becomes a shark, the next person a cookie, the third person a hat and the fourth a key. The teacher holds up each object, showing it to each person during the assigning. *You are a shark, you are a cookie, you are hat and you are a key, etc.* The naming process is part of the teaching so be sure that all can see and hear. The four items are assigned one by one until all students have a name.

The objects are placed in a line on the floor in front of the group. Someone volunteers to make the first call and his/her chair is eliminated, making one less chair than there are students. The volunteer stands behind the objects and, facing the group, calls out any two objects or pictures. If the student cannot say the words, s/he points out the objects with a foot and the teacher makes the call.

Those players having the name of the objects called must change places to any chairs other than the ones in which they were just sitting. The caller immediately tries to sit down in one of the vacated chairs. The person who does not get a chair, and therefore is left standing, is the next caller.

When two students land on equal portions of a chair at the same time, they both become callers; don't allow them to fight it out. The teacher repeats the call during the changing, holding up or pointing to the objects so it will be clear to all what has been named.

The new caller (or same one, if s/he failed to secure a seat) announces any two items for the next change of chairs. The teacher may want to allow students to call three objects instead of two, or occasionally to allow, *Everybody change!* The more objects called, the more movement there is. Caution the students on the importance of avoiding collisions. When two or more objects are called, all must remain seated and wait until the last object is called before chair-changing can begin.

At the end, ask for a show of hands of winners--those who were never caught without a chair or were never in the calling position (with the exception of the volunteer who began).

With children younger than first grade, you need enough of the same objects or pictures so that each student can hold the item s/he is named. This serves as a constant reminder to the child, plus gives the teacher the visual clue of each child's assignment in order to monitor the movement.

Variation

After a few rounds, new words can easily be substituted by assigning new names for the various groups, for example, *Those who were whales are now snowballs*. The level of difficulty can be easily increased to practice other structures, such as verbs, adjectives, time, weather or other expressions. For example, with the class assigned the names of different foods, the callers are required to name one item they like and one they do not like. *I like cheese and I don't like pears*. Those who were assigned to be cheese or pears would change places.

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